

STAFF

- Steve Pullen
*Deputy Director
Administration and Finance*
- Lynette Greenfield
Research & Evaluation Manager
- Baron Blakley
Research Supervisor
- Deborah Anchors
Research Analyst
- Joel Browning
Research Analyst
- Alex Chobotov
Programmer Analyst
- Michael Garrett
Research Economist
- Terrance Gray
Research Analyst
- Susan M. Nicely
Research Analyst
- Photographs supplied by
Kelly Gargas*

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JUVENILE FEMALE OFFENDERS

FY2002 ADMISSIONS TO DJJ

“For decades, girls who have broken the law have entered a juvenile justice system that was designed to help someone else”¹

by Susan M. Nicely, Alex Chobotov, and Baron Blakley

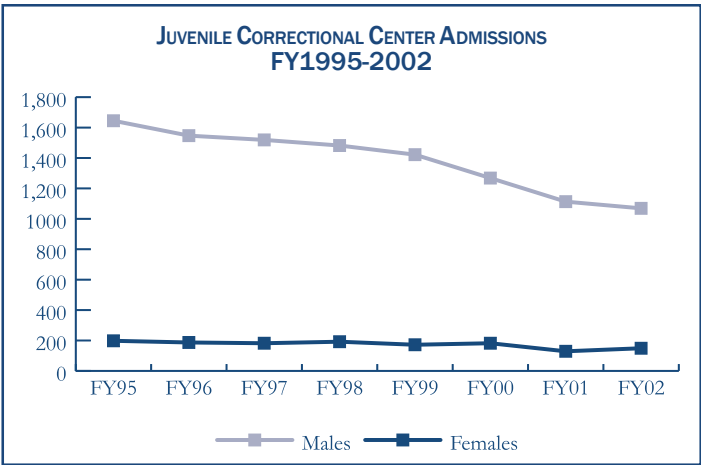
INTRODUCTION

Juvenile female offenders have historically been overlooked by academics and practitioners in criminal justice. A lack of understanding about this subpopulation of offenders can result in the development and maintenance of treatment programs that, while appropriate for young males, do not meet the specific needs of female juvenile delinquents. It is the purpose of this research to present a snapshot of the juvenile female offender population admitted to the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) in FY2002 in order to increase awareness and allow informed decision-making. The snapshot begins with overall admissions data to present current trends. Demographics are presented next, and then specific offense information is presented to show what these juveniles did to bring them into the system. Social history is also explored, bringing to light psychological issues, family and living situations, and education to examine possible factors impacting delinquency. Lastly, current treatment programs and recidivism rates are discussed to examine existing opportunities for female offenders, and to determine the success of DJJ’s existing efforts to address this population. By understanding who they are and where they come from, it may be possible to dispel misconceptions and improve the treatment options for this group of young offenders.

ADMISSIONS

Juvenile offenders admitted to DJJ (“wards”) initially are processed through the Reception and Diagnostic Center (RDC) and are subsequently placed in the appropriate juvenile correctional center (JCC). All females are now placed in Culpeper JCC, which is reserved for female offenders.

Between FY1995 and 2002, there was significant overall decrease in both male and female admissions. Most recently, from FY2001 to FY2002, female admissions *increased* by 16% (20 juveniles), while male admissions decreased by 4% (44



juveniles). This may not indicate the start of a trend, but it does highlight the necessity to understand the female offender population. At any given time, females account for 10%-13% of all admissions to the Virginia DJJ.

DEMOGRAPHICS

When demographic patterns are examined, a “typical” ward emerges from the numbers. For both females and males this “typical” ward was a black 17 year old.

Approximately 83% of female admissions were between the ages of 15 and 17, while admissions under 14 were 5%. The age distribution is similar to national statistics presented in the Uniform Crime Report showing that, “the majority of juvenile female arrests cluster around the ages of 15, 16, and 17.”² For juveniles admitted to DJJ in FY2002, the average age at first arrest was thirteen years old for both sexes. Only a very small percentage of admissions of either sex were of a race

LENGTH OF STAY (LOS)

When a juvenile is adjudicated, the judge can order an indeterminate or a determinate commitment. An indeterminate commitment is limited to 36 months, except for murder and manslaughter cases. A determinate commitment is limited to the juvenile's 21st birthday, which could result in a sentence that is significantly longer than 36 months. With a determinate sentence, the judge specifies the time period for commitment, whereas with an indeterminate sentence, the juvenile's length of stay (LOS) will be determined by DJJ's LOS policy. The LOS policy assigns a range of months to the ward, based upon the severity of current and prior offenses. More serious offenses have a longer assigned LOS. Behavior while committed, as well as other factors, influence whether the juvenile is released on her early release date, or later than that. If the juvenile remains with the Department longer, near the high end of her assigned LOS, it may be an indication that the juvenile acted out while in the JCC. Longer stays can also be due to the juvenile's need to complete required treatment programs. If the juvenile's actual LOS exceeds their assigned LOS, it is usually because the juvenile has acted out and been charged and found guilty of some other offense while in the JCC.

other than white or black. The racial characteristics of females admitted in FY2002 were evenly split between white and black wards, with 3% of another race. However, for male admissions, nearly two-thirds were black, and about one-third white, with 4% of another race.

Six localities contributed about one-third of the total female admissions: Virginia Beach (11% of female admissions), Henrico County (7%), Chesterfield County (5%), Newport News (5%), Norfolk (4%), and Hampton (4%). The five cities that committed the most males (again, about one-third) were slightly different: Richmond (9% of male admissions), Virginia Beach (7%), Newport News (7%), Norfolk (7%), and Chesapeake (4%).

OFFENSE INFORMATION

Generally, females commit less serious offenses than males.³ Since FY1998, females have been more likely to be admitted without ever being adjudicated guilty for a felony. However, in FY2001 the state legislature changed the criteria for commitment to DJJ to a minimum of four Class 1 misdemeanors (up from a minimum of 2) or one felony. As a result, the number of

MOST SERIOUS OFFENSE FY 2002 ADMISSIONS

Offense Type	Males	Females
Abusive Language	0.0%	0.7%
Alcohol	0.6%	0.7%
Arson	1.3%	2.8%
Assault	14.0%	31.2%
Burglary	14.1%	6.4%
Contempt of Court	0.6%	0.0%
Disorderly Conduct	0.4%	2.8%
Escapes	0.3%	0.7%
Extortion	0.9%	0.0%
Failure to Appear	0.1%	0.0%
Fraud	0.9%	7.8%
Kidnapping	0.8%	0.0%
Larceny	25.0%	20.6%
Misc./Other	0.4%	0.0%
Murder	0.7%	0.0%
Narcotics	9.9%	3.6%
Obscenity	0.2%	0.0%
Obstruction of Justice	0.6%	0.7%
Prob./Parole Violation	5.5%	8.5%
Robbery	9.3%	5.0%
Sexual Assault	8.2%	2.8%
Telephone Law	0.1%	0.0%
Traffic	1.1%	0.0%
Trespass	0.7%	0.0%
Vandalism	2.1%	5.7%
Weapons	2.6%	0.0%

C.R. MINOR RECEPTION & DIAGNOSTIC CENTER (RDC)

RDC is the central intake facility for committed youth in Virginia, and has an operating capacity of 166 beds. Juveniles have an average length of stay of four weeks. RDC's primary function is the evaluation and classification of youth. While at RDC, juveniles are given medical, psychological, behavioral and sociological evaluations, which will be used in recommending treatment and placement. In order to determine educational level and identify any special needs, juveniles are administered a battery of tests by the Department of Correctional Education. At the conclusion of the evaluation process, individual evaluators meet on each juvenile case to determine treatment needs, length of stay (LOS) assignment, initial classification, medical/dental considerations, and placement recommendations. From there, the juvenile is sent to her designated correctional facility.

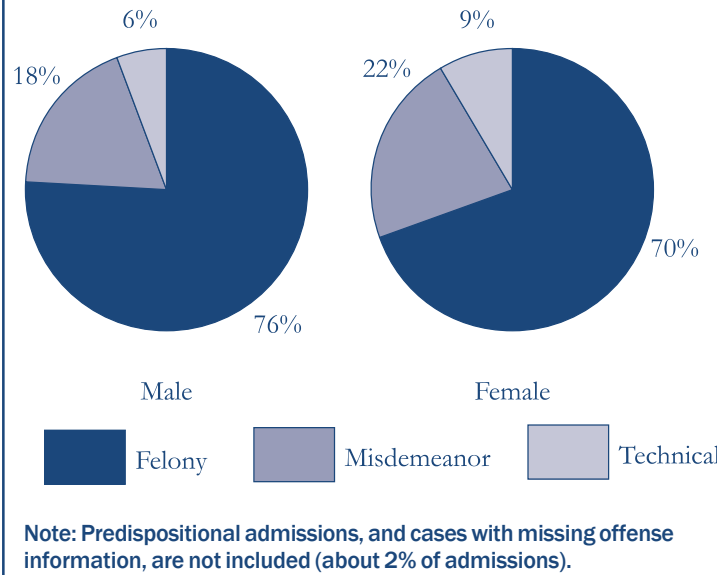
juveniles committed for misdemeanors has decreased significantly. Females committed for misdemeanor offenses decreased 37% between FY1998 and FY2002, with a decrease of only 24% for males.

Forty-one percent of females admitted in FY2002 had a person offense as their most serious committing offense, vs. 35% of males. This is in contrast with a national study that found that (in 1989 and 1993) males were more likely than females to have been committed for a person offense.⁴

For those juveniles who had a person offense as their most serious, both females and males were about three times more likely to have been committed for a felony than a misdemeanor. If the most serious committing offense was not a person crime, females were about three times more likely to have been committed for a felony than a misdemeanor, while males were almost five times more likely.

Overall, in FY2002, 70% of females admitted to DJJ had at least one felony

MOST SERIOUS COMMITTING OFFENSE SEVERITY FY 2002 ADMISSIONS FOR MALES AND FEMALES



among their committing offenses, compared to 76% of males. Therefore, on average, females were more likely to have been committed for less serious offenses than their male counterparts.

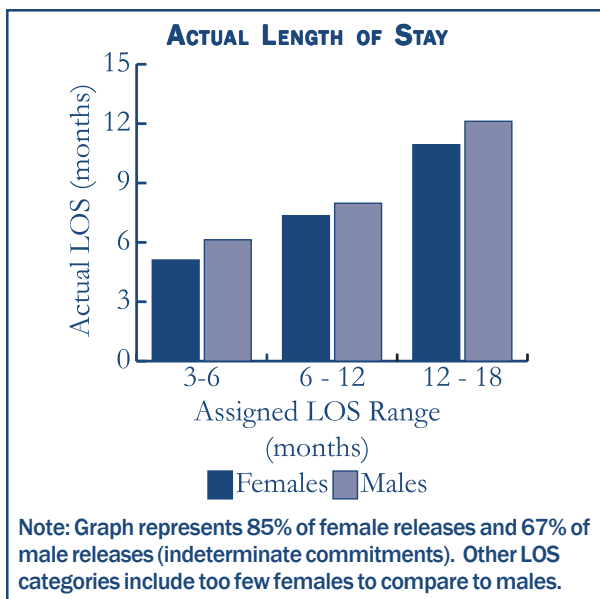
LOS AND CLASSIFICATION

A juvenile's length of stay (LOS) assignment is determined largely by his or her current and prior offenses. Given that females tend to be committed for less serious offenses, it is not surprising that males tend to have longer LOS

assignments than females. In FY2002, the "typical" female had an assigned LOS of 6-12 months, while the "typical" male had an assigned LOS of 12-18 months.

A small portion of juveniles are adjudicated with an LOS predetermined by the court (see "Length of Stay" sidebar for a comparison of determinate and indeterminate commitments). Determinate commitments accounted for 2% of female admissions and 11% of male admissions.

To determine the actual time juveniles stayed with DJJ (vs. their assigned LOS range), juveniles released in FY2002 were studied. Females stayed an average of 9 months compared to 12 months for males. Juveniles determined to need sex offender treatment stayed significantly beyond their assigned LOS. For males, sex offenders had an average actual LOS of 24 months. There were 99 males released in FY2002 who had a sex offender treatment need. For females, there was only one release in FY2002 with the same treatment need, and the actual LOS for her was 9.5 months.



CLASSIFICATION

As a juvenile's evaluation period at RDC comes to a close, an initial classification level is assigned by staff who have worked with and assessed the juvenile. The classification level is used as a guide for appropriate placement of the juvenile, to identify needs, and to separate violent and non-violent youth. The initial classification form takes into consideration several factors: severity of current offense, offense history, prior commitments to DJJ, previous assaultive behavior while detained, institutional adjustment, and escape or runaway history. The stature of the juvenile, as well as any special needs, are indicated on the form, along with the classification score. Juveniles are reassessed every 90 days, or as needed based upon behavior, taking into consideration the following factors: severity of current offense, prior offense history, prior commitments, escape or runaway history, assaultive/escape behavior, frequency of institutional offenses, treatment program participation and education/work program/vocational training participation.

“...studies show that nearly all runaways leave home for understandable reasons such as flight from physical and sexual abuse and neglect.”⁵

When males and females are compared within their assigned LOS categories, excluding juveniles requiring sex offender treatment, males and females had similar actual lengths of stay. That is, although males tend to receive longer LOS assignments, males and females with the same LOS assignment can expect to remain in the JCCs for about the same amount of time.

The security classification level assigned to each juvenile is also impacted by the juvenile's offense, though other behavioral factors have an equal or greater weight (see “Classification” sidebar). Wards are assessed and assigned an initial security classification level while at RDC. Both the “typical” female and male had an initial classification of II (Medium). Of FY2002 female admissions, over 90% had an initial classification of II or III (Medium or High), compared to 83% of males. Only a small percentage of wards, 5% of males and 6% of females, were assigned the highest level of security, IV (Intensive).

PSYCHIATRIC HISTORY

Juveniles admitted to DJJ frequently have a history of mental health issues. This is especially true for females. Researchers have found that, “Abuse is the tie that binds many of these girls...(they) voice feelings of

helplessness, distrust, and ultimately rage...they've simply given up hope that there might be another way... many look to death as a way to gain peace.”⁶ In FY2002, 21% of females reported prior suicide attempts that required medical attention, compared to only 7% of males. This is consistent with other research that reported, “24% (of girls) said they had seriously considered suicide”.⁷



Female offenders in Culpeper JCC computer lab

Female offenders were also more likely to have received psychiatric treatment prior to arriving at DJJ. Thirty-six percent of female wards admitted in FY2002 reported prior psychiatric hospitalization, more than double the percentage for males (14%). Nearly two-thirds of females had taken psychotropic medications, which included anti-psychotic, anti-anxiety, psycho-stimulants, and others. For males, less than half reported a history of taking these medications.

Over three quarters of both males and females admitted in FY2002 meet the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for behavioral disorders, such as

Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Conduct Disorder. Similarly, 64% of females and 55% of males meet the diagnostic criteria for having a substance abuse disorder or being substance dependent. However, when substance abuse disorders and the most common behavioral disorders are eliminated, 48% of females admitted in FY2002 would qualify for at least one other disorder, compared to 33% of males.

Forty-five percent of females met the DSM-IV criteria for a mood disorder such as depression or bipolar disorder, vs. 25% of males. Females were also twice as likely to meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder such as post traumatic stress disorder or panic disorder, though only a small percentage of either sex were assessed with these disorders (4% of females and 2% of males).

PARENTAL HISTORY

The information collected at RDC includes particulars about a juvenile's home life, including aspects of their relationships with their parents, and the living situations they experienced. The most recent living situation for a ward (their home prior to commitment) can offer a glimpse into his or her family/social background.

The most common living situation for females admitted to DJJ in FY2002 was living with one parent and a step-parent (20%). The next most likely living situation for females was being a runaway from home (17%). Only 1% of males were from a runaway situation. This finding concurs with other research that says, “a higher proportion of girls first enter the juvenile justice system as runaways”.⁸ Females were also more likely than males to be living in a group

PSYCHOTROPICS

Anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, anti-psychotic, and stimulant medications were included in the examination of psychotropic medication histories. Results showed that females were more likely than males to have taken anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, and anti-psychotic medications. Males were more likely, overall, to have taken stimulants.



Female offender cleaning windows

home (4% vs. 2%) or a psychiatric facility (3% vs. less than 1%) prior to admission.

The males admitted during FY2002 were more likely than the females to be living in a mother-only or both-parent household (46% for males, vs. 18% for females). These differences disappear, however, when you examine *all* prior living situations. Just over half of both male and female wards reported having *ever* lived with both parents, and over two-thirds reported having lived with just their mothers at some point in their lives.

Even when all prior living situations are examined, females were twice as likely to have lived in a one parent/one step-parent home, group home, or psychiatric hospital. This is probably partially due to the fact that females on average were much more likely than males to have experienced multiple living situations. Forty-two percent of females had lived in five or more different situations prior to being admitted to DJJ, vs. 18% of males. Only 13% of females had lived in just one or two situations, vs. 40% of males.

Considering the instability that many female wards admitted in FY2002 had experienced, it is perhaps not surprising that they revealed a more troubled family history than their male counterparts. The females were more likely to have been sexually abused (12% vs. 2%) or physically abused (30% vs. 13 %) by their parents. About seven times more

females than males (36% vs. 5%) reported having experienced some form of sexual abuse perpetrated by parents, acquaintances, other family members, and/or strangers. The Florida DJJ reports a similar trend saying that, “girls in the juvenile justice system are three times more likely to have been victims of sexual abuse than boys are”.⁹

Overall, females were also more likely to have reported being physically abused by anyone (including parents), at 33% vs. 14% for males. This is consistent with a recent study that found that, “a higher number of girls have been abused physically, sexually, ... and the role modeling in the family hasn’t been particularly good”.¹⁰

Females were also more likely to have had parents or other adult figures abuse substances (62% vs. 51%); and were more likely to have been abandoned or rejected by parents or other adults (77% vs. 59%). Parental abuse and neglect puts youth at an increased risk for criminal behavior, according to one researcher who stated that, “when compared with girls who have not been abused or neglected during childhood, abused and neglected girls are nearly twice as likely to be arrested as juveniles”.¹¹

Twenty-six percent of females also reported having parents/other adults placed in outpatient mental health treatment compared to 12% of the males. About 40% of both sexes reported having parents who had been incarcerated, and 9% of both males and females reported having parents who had been in a psychiatric hospital. Males were slightly more likely to have experienced the death of a parent (10% of females vs. 12% of males).

SEXUAL HISTORY

The average self-reported number of sexual partners for females admitted in FY2002 was five, while males reported an average of seven. On average, female

offenders’ self-reported first intercourse occurred at age 14, while the average age for males was 13. Three percent of females reported having no sexual partners compared to 6% of males.

EDUCATION

Females and males admitted in FY2002 were similar with regard to their past school attendance and last completed grade. The majority of both females and males had moderate or severe problems with school attendance. This supports past research on female juvenile offenders, which demonstrated that “school was also problematic for the girls interviewed. All ten had skipped school at least once...once they entered high school, they began to cut classes, using school only to find friends and start their days.”¹²

For both sexes, the average education level is below what would be expected for their age groups. Specifically, over 80% of male and female admissions in FY2002 were between ages 15 and 17. Typically this age range would fall into grades 9-11. However, only 28% of females, and 33% of males actually fell into this range. For females and males, the last grade completed was most likely to be 8th grade.

RDC administers the Woodcock-Johnson achievement test to ascertain a juvenile’s specific education level in three areas: reading, writing, and mathematics. Females tested above males in reading and writing; and the two were the same in math. This is consistent with national data (using a similar test) which found, “gender gaps favoring female students

Education

Juveniles testing at or below the 5th grade level:

Females	Males
• 13% for reading	• 31% for reading
• 25% for math	• 31% for math
• 45% for writing	• 66% for writing

in reading at ages 13 and 17... the difference between male and female average math scores in 1999 was not statistically significant at any age... [in tests of writing skills] females outperformed males at 4th, 8th, and 11th grade".¹³ Nine percent of females and 20% of males tested at or below the 5th grade level in all three areas.

TREATMENT PROGRAMS

While at DJJ, wards are required to participate in various treatment programs, with the goal of helping them learn to change their own behavior. The three main programs, available to both males and females, are substance abuse, anger control, and sex offender services. As noted earlier, females are far less likely than males to require sex offender treatment (5% of female admissions in FY2002, vs. 13% of males). However, females are more likely than males to require anger control treatment (97% of females, 88% of males). The two sexes are similar with regard to substance abuse treatment needs (77% of females, 76% of males).

Culpeper JCC provides additional mental health services to include individual and group therapy, crisis management, 24 hour on call mental health coverage, a mental health unit (Intensive Services Unit), and medication management. The Behavioral Services Unit provides these services and is staffed by clinical psychologists and an adolescent certified psychiatrist. Given the unique treatment needs of female offenders, mental health services are tailored to provide a female emphasis.

The unique treatment needs and interests of female offenders also makes it necessary to have programs tailored for females. This could include programming to meet specific female needs, such as the Baby Program, which has been used in the past to teach female wards the skills and responsibilities



Female offenders and staff in Culpeper JCC gym

associated with caring for a baby. Female-specific programming could also refer to standard treatment programs that are customized to address the specific needs of the female offenders. For example, the grant funded substance abuse treatment program at Culpeper focuses on female issues and utilizes the book "Female Emphasis" for its group sessions.

Culpeper JCC also offers an Independent Living Program in its list of available treatment options. This program spans eight weeks and strives to teach wards the skills they need to live on their own once released.

Other program options include volunteer services, which incorporate weekly group sessions on such topics as

nutrition and religion. These group programs are offered in the afternoon as an option for those who wish to attend.

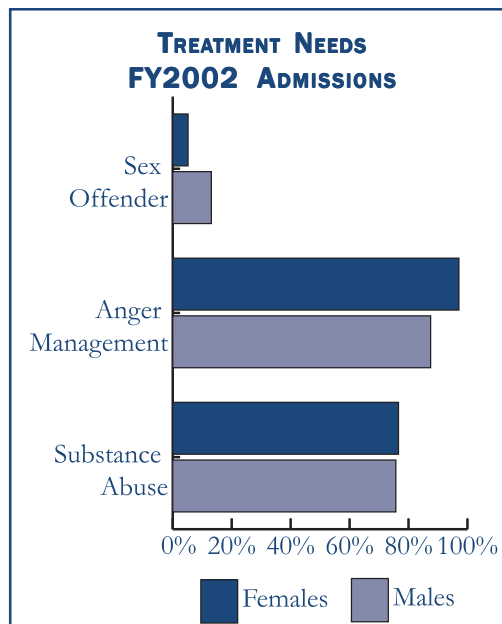
All of these programs and service options attempt to equip the females with skills they will need once they move into the world beyond the juvenile justice system.

YOUTH INDUSTRIES

Currently, Culpeper JCC, the only JCC in Virginia's system that houses females, is involved in a pilot embroidery program through DJJ's Youth Industries. The program teaches them the art of embroidery, which includes training them in the use of an \$80,000 system and working through a computer interface to create, select, and apply designs. They have produced professional quality work, ranging from simple to highly complex designs, for uniforms in the correctional centers, and are beginning to advertise for additional work. In addition to the specific embroidery training, these wards also learn the record keeping and related business aspects of this operation. This will allow the juveniles to develop a variety of job skills in preparation for returning to the community.

Culpeper also provides a work program for the female wards. This is available to females who have been approved to participate due to their progress and behavior. The work they do includes helping the staff clean, kitchen help, laundry, and assisting recreational staff with gym facility cleaning. For their work, they are paid a minimal hourly rate and are scheduled specific times to work. Programs like this are tailored to teach wards valuable work skills and responsibility.

Youth Industries, in conjunction with the Department of Correctional Education, plans to implement a culinary program in September 2003. This program will



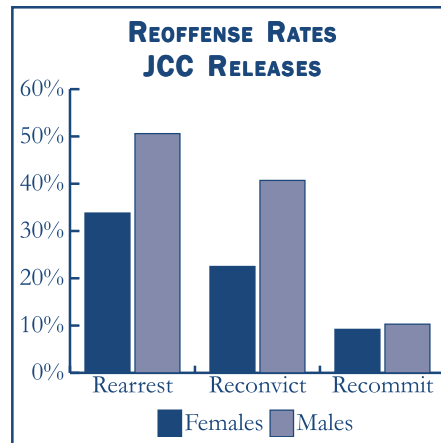
be a continuation of the food service apprenticeship program offered to the female wards when they had been at Bon Air JCC.

Female offenders at DJJ have also received work training and experience in office services technology, such as data entry, desktop publishing, resume preparation, stationery and greeting card design, and other related services.

RECIDIVISM

“Recidivism, or reoffending, is an important concept for juvenile and adult criminal justice systems because it provides a means to measure outcome success.”¹⁴ DJJ’s juvenile tracking system, which provides such data as court intakes, commitments, and probation placements for juveniles; and adult arrest and conviction data from the State Police combine to provide a long-term arrest history for juveniles released from the juvenile correctional centers.

The most recent 12-month reoffense data are available for juveniles released in FY2001. These data include all criminal offenses except: violation of probation or parole, contempt of court, failure to appear, or traffic offenses (other than felony or misdemeanor level offenses). Females released in FY2001



were less likely than their male counterparts to be rearrested, reconvicted, or recommitted. Interestingly, there is only a 1 percent difference between males and females for commitments (9% for females, 10% for males). For rearrest and reconviction, the disparity between the sexes is much greater (for rearrest, 34% of females vs. 51% of males; for reconviction, 23% of females vs. 41% of males).

Chronic offenders, who appear and reappear in the system, who tend to have early contact with the justice system, and who progress to more serious and violent crimes, are a particular concern in juvenile justice. DJJ identifies chronic offenders as those with four or more

new juvenile or adult arrests, following release from a JCC. Female offenders represented 10% of juvenile correctional center releases from FY2001, but only 4% of the chronic offenders.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, female offenders admitted to the Department of Juvenile Justice are very different from their male counterparts. They are more racially diverse, more likely to have been committed for a less serious offense, and will spend less time in the JCCs. They are much more likely to have a history of psychiatric needs, and to come from a tumultuous home life. They are more likely to have been the victims of sexual or physical abuse. They have different treatment needs, being less likely to need sex offender treatment but more likely to need anger control treatment. They also tend to be better educated than male offenders, though they are still below the grade levels that would be expected of their ages. Finally, after release from the JCCs, female offenders are less likely to be rearrested or reconvicted.

Although females represent only a small percentage of admissions to DJJ, these distinct differences require different treatment approaches. A recent update from the National Institute of Corrections indicates that “the juvenile justice arena recognizes that juvenile female offenders have unique needs and require differentiated programs and services from those offered to male juvenile offenders in the same system.”¹⁶ By providing these differentiated programs and services, the juvenile justice system can give female offenders the opportunity to re-enter society with the skills they need to succeed.

Recidivism

There are three commonly accepted definitions used to measure recidivism/reoffending:¹⁵

- **Rearrest** refers to a petition filed at intake for a new delinquency complaint or an adult arrest for a new criminal offense. Rearrest is an important measure of reoffending because it represents the initial official contact with the criminal justice system. Uses of rearrest rates are limited as a gauge of reoffending because rearrest measures police activity, and juveniles may be rearrested for offenses they did not actually commit.
- **Reconviction** (DJJ’s official recidivism measure) refers to a guilty adjudication for a delinquent or criminal offense. This is a more stringent method to measure reoffending. Because reconviction rates are based on the final disposition for an offense, only cases with an admission of guilt or a court adjudication of guilty are counted.
- **Recommitment** refers to any return to a JCC, after having been previously released from a JCC. This measure indicates that the new guilty offense is serious enough to warrant a return to state incarceration.

ENDNOTES

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VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION SECTION

P.O. Box 1110

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 23218-1110